CREATING A DYNAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION CLASS ENVIRONMENT USING CASE STUDIES

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Abstract

Teaching is often interesting and satisfying because of human interaction. Today, in many higher education classrooms, more professors are encouraging students to participate in gaining their own knowledge and expertise through analyzing real events through the case study approach. When constructing, discussing, and dissecting cases, the student reflects and integrates knowledge from diverse sources. This paper explores the case-study teaching process and results in a graduate Education course. The findings revealed dynamic classroom interaction, profound involvement between the student and the situation, and the acquisition of a tool for solving learning problems.

KEY WORDS: Teaching, bilingual teachers, bilingual classroom, academic development, learning disabilities, language development, parental involvement, higher education practices, pre-service and in-service teacher training

BACKGROUND

Research indicates that using case studies in training both pre-service and in-service teachers provides them with a variety of opportunities to broaden and expand their teaching skills and problem solving abilities [Miller & Kantrov, 1998; Ashbaugh & Kasten, 1991; Kowalski, 1991]. The exposure to the analysis, construction and discussion of cases allows students the opportunities to build analytic and synthetic skills, apply concepts from theory to practice, learn to solve problems, develop higher order thinking skills, and enhance both their oral and written communication skills. Most graduate programs in education are designed to prepare practitioners. The vast majority of universities offering degrees in teacher education, bilingual education, and bilingual-bicultural education are engaged in pre-service training and in continuing education of in-service teachers. Historically, graduate programs have been occupied with the transmission of technical skills. Programs have been redesigned to prepare both pre-service and in-service teachers in becoming reflective practitioners. These students are expected not only to know current theories but also to internalize them well enough to apply and adapt them. Teachers need to be self-reflective and to think critically about their craft [Silverman, Welty & Lyon, 1992]. Northeastern Illinois University has responded by making the appropriate changes, modifications, and reforms regionally mandated for teaching methodologies and practices in the graduate classroom; case studies are encouraged.

A case study can be defined as a description of an actual situation commonly involving a decision, a challenge, an opportunity, a problem or an issue faced by a person or persons in an organization, e.g. a school setting [Leenders, Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, 2001]. In case education, the cases can help...
students look at dilemmas from the inside out and not merely as external critics. The use of case study allows the students to (1) participate in discussing the analysis and solution of practical problems, (2) apply theory to practice, and (3) learn by doing and teaching others. Many have discussed the advantages of using cases in the classroom. Among them, Kowalski [1998] provided one of the most exhaustive lists of benefits for using cases as a teaching tool:

- Cases provide an excellent format for the development of critical-thinking skills.
- Cases offer a unique way for developing problem-solving skills.
- Cases provide a process of participatory learning.
- Cases require students to perform.
- Cases expose students to the complexities of organizational life.
- Cases allow students to debate and discuss selected courses of action.
- Cases help students make mature analysis, critical summaries, and responsible judgments about very intricate and difficult situations.

Most cases are intended to represent reality even though they may be disguised to protect the participants and entities, i.e. students, parents, teachers, and schools. One of the major purposes for using cases in the classroom, especially at the higher education level, is to create an environment for reflective practice. The processes involved in case study method augment professional thinking and facilitate the integration of knowledge with experience [Knowles, 1984].

CASE DEVELOPMENT

PARTICIPANTS

This project originated as a collaborative effort among education faculty who decided to use case studies as a teaching tool. Instead of having students discussing and responding to cases, graduate students enrolled in the Bilingual Education master degree program were asked to construct cases based on real events, authentic protagonists, and existing institutions which would help them find solutions to real problems in their communities [Brookfield, 1985]. All 18 participants are practicing teachers, working in the Chicago Public Schools with bilingual students. They hold State of Illinois temporary teaching certificates and are currently completing requirements for regular licensures.

Each participant was required to create a case study about a student in his/her classroom or school. They were instructed to find out about specific and individual subjects who manifested an identified learning disability. The proper consent, prior to the case research, from principals, parents, and other pertinent officials was required to respect the ethical aspects of behavioral research and its impact on people’s lives. The consent form clarified the obligations and responsibilities of each party and the student subject could decline to participate in or to withdraw from the research at any time.

BUILDING THE CASE

For the purpose of this research, a case study represented the unit of analysis. After reviewing several authors and research studies on teaching with cases, the researchers decided to design leading questions guiding students in case development. A major consideration was to have the purpose of each case embedded in an educational context with learning outcomes. The following questions were designed:

1. What is the key problem in this case study?
2. What are the key issues, factors or elements that can lead to this problem?
3. What kind of data and resources are accessible and available to substantiate the case?
4. What kind of strategies and interventions can be used to address this problem?
5. What are the educational implications for the classroom teacher of this particular issue or dilemma?
6. What educational and practical value and importance do you see in this case?
PARTICIPANTS’ TRAINING PHASE

Participants attended two orientation and guidance sessions where they were provided with general steps for constructing cases. They received two samples of case studies in Education for use as models. They also cooperatively resolved cases and wrote short simulations of case development. In these orientation sessions, each participant was also given a handout containing the main parts of the case study to be constructed:

1. Background of the student, family
2. Description of academic and medical history
3. Observation of the child
4. Interview with child, parents, school personnel (social worker, psychologist, teacher)
5. Analysis of the issues/problems
6. Recommendation of interventions/suggestions to remediate the problem

Another instruction given during the training phase was related to the themes of the cases. The 18 students identified the four most critical aspects that concern their educational practices [Knowles, 1984]. In groups, they discussed and then selected the themes for their cases. They chose the themes of academic development, parental involvement, learning disabilities, and language development.

EVALUATION RESEARCH DESIGN

For the purpose of this case analysis, evaluation research was brought into play because it is a process of making judgments about the merit, value, or worth of educational programs, projects, materials, and instructional techniques [Borg and Gall, 1999]. In the research for this current WACRA paper, college student participants constructed their own cases based upon provided guidelines. The researchers evaluated students’ work based upon the techniques utilized, presentations, and their process development. The researchers carefully used program delineation to ensure the feasibility, accuracy, utility, and appropriateness of the cases. Program delineation is the process of analyzing and describing the significant characteristics of an educational technique. The steps for building the case were the basis for analysis and evaluation. A rubric table incorporated all the case elements and each case was assessed to determine if it met each of the established rubric standards.

CASE EVALUATION ANALYSIS

Each of the 18 students produced a case following the directions given. The 18 cases revealed well-crafted descriptions and situations that captured issues, invited multiple interpretations, and were rich in interesting details. Overall, the cases’ content maximized potential for learning and discussion. The cases were grouped according to themes: five on language development, four on parental involvement, six on learning disabilities, and three on academic development.

Based on the construction of the cases, three questions were later investigated with the students. They were asked to respond to a brief open-ended questionnaire with the following questions: (1) What skills were you able to revisit and/or learn in developing and/or creating your own case study? (2) Would you use the case study method to study and analyze future students’ classroom situations? and (3) How comfortable do you feel in teaching other colleagues with case studies and why?

FINDINGS

The student responses to these questions allowed both the students and researchers to reach productive conclusions. Following is a list of some of the students’ statements organized by questions, which demonstrate their reactions and reflections.

Question 1: Skills learned in creating a case study

I have learned:
• Investigating curriculum & teacher practices.
Creating and monitoring a personalized and authentic remediation plan created for a specific student based on his/her specific needs.

Proving not only to myself but also others how important it is to have good literacy and oral skills in the native language.

Revisiting my skills and instructional strategies of short-vowel sounds particularly for English language learners.

Reflecting about the unique needs of English language learners and how to adequately support their learning.

Recording, listening, asking pertinent questions.

Gathering supportive data.

Applying what I have learned in my training to the student's case.

Reviewing and applying the bilingual teaching methods and adapt them to a monolingual environment.

Developing a better understanding of different variables affecting students.

Learning about the process and the difficulties involved in developing a case study from asking permission to school administration to parents, to all the forms and terminology, there is certainly a lot to learn.

That it is very important not to label or make assumptions about your students. There are many variables that came into play with students' achievement and you must first take everything into consideration and then find the problem.

Knowing how a student learns a second language.

Understanding, valuing and respecting the students' native language and culture.

Learning how to use students' background in determining how it affects student success or failure.

Being aware of my own expectations when developing my classroom and learning outcomes.

Looking more closely at my student's work and using it to help me understand other areas where they are having difficulty. I also realized that communication is so important, even if the parents can not speak the English language—at all cost it is important to find some way to communicate with students, parents and everyone involved with the child's schooling.

Learning the different stages of language acquisition, differentiating them, and exploring further.

Question 2: Using case method for future analysis classroom situations

Yes, I would:

It is a strong example of the importance of looking at the whole child, not just the academic portion.

Although sometimes modifications may be needed according to the situation.

I am fortunate to work in a one-to-one setting where I have the opportunity to get to know my students very well.

It has been very helpful in understanding where the students are coming from. I think I would go even more in-depth next time.

This was a great way to analyze the students' background and abilities in a positive way.

I feel that frequency words need to be revisited monthly for students, especially second language learners in order to succeed.

I believe this case study has helped me become more aware of how bilingual students at my school are not evaluated properly.

I would model the case study and I would also recommend it to other teachers and the school social worker. I have spoken to my principal about this and it was well received.

I have collected good information and strategies that I can use in future case studies.

I would use this case study model in future classroom situations because it gives wonderful insights and a sense of direction on how to correct the problems in class with struggling students.
• This case will definitely be useful for future classrooms use although this is the first time I have used it.
• I have paved the way to do other case studies. I hope to continue doing them so that I can contribute to meeting the needs of all my students.
• I would use this model to analyze future students because I felt it met its purpose. Although working one-to-one is challenging, it is worth it.

Question 3: *Teaching others how to use case study method*
I feel:
• Very comfortable-- in special education we are required to do case study evaluations as a team. This is a routine thing/practice for me.
• Very comfortable because all new experiences should be shared. This opens the door for suggestions and comments from other colleagues who may be more experienced about a similar situation. We all learn from each other.
• Very comfortable teaching with case studies as I have completed several for professional and educational purposes.
• Very comfortable, I would love to tell other students about the case study process and how it influences our teaching. I like hearing about other cases and watching both teachers and students’ growth--in our class!!
• Somewhat comfortable. I do not feel that I am completely aware of all of the components that should be included although I understand that they may change depending on the case and situation.
• My case could teach them something but there is still a lot more that they could learn that I could have included.
• Very comfortable. I believe there are many lessons to be learned about case study methods.
• Comfortable because my Bachelor is in Psychology and Art Therapy and this gives me a strong background in case studies. I learned how to apply this case study model on student academic and social functioning.
• Somewhat comfortable. I am still in the process of learning myself.
• Comfortable sharing my case study with my colleagues.
• Very comfortable teaching others about the case study. I learned a lot in this class and a lot of research on case study. I learned the process of how to conduct a case study.
• This is my first experience doing case study and I learned many things about myself as well as my students. I feel comfortable about this particular case and I look forward to being exposed to more opportunities in my graduate studies.
• Comfortable because I have a good relationship with other teachers in my school. I found that if I show them that I value their opinions and comments they in return value me. We learned from each other.
• Comfortable sharing my experience because I wanted to provide my colleagues with some of the factors I observed that sometimes are not apparent.

**ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

As expected, this group of students found that creating cases for study was a productive exercise in their educational experience. They constructed interesting cases that met the guidelines that had been established for this exercise. In their reflections about their experience the participants referred to the skills they acquired, the improvement of their teaching practices, and the suitability and feasibility of using of case study method in the classroom. The group confirmed that discussing and studying cases offers the opportunity to analyze situations from a variety of perspectives. For many, a case acted as a tool for learning, a device for teaching, and as an implement for increasing an active and dynamic participation in the classroom.

The case experience developed for this group of students was not limited to writing and creating the case and its elements. The case study encompassed expanding student knowledge of curriculum, assessment, or instruction relating to academic development, language development, learning
disabilities, and parental involvement. Across a variety of contexts students found that constructing real-life cases is not simple. They were involved in the complex processes of obtaining permissions, identifying the event, defining the problem, searching references, developing the narrative, and looking for solutions. Ultimately, all cases ended up appropriately written, creatively designed, and effectively linked to theory. Their presentations promoted discussions of critical education issues and raising a variety of viewpoints.

Finally, the students were for the most part willing to continue using case studies in their educational setting. They also were willing to share the skills they had acquired with their colleagues. This suggests that these teachers are becoming reflective practitioners. They are willing to continue to use case studies, thus actively seeking their own professional development.

REFERENCES


